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Feras Alkabani reflects on the meanings of 'lockdown' in a war zone.

Fifty Shades of Lockdown

Covid-19 in Syria: Another Calamity (on top of everything else)

As the world struggles to adjust to a new reality of lockdowns, travel bans and curbed freedoms, Syria braces itself for yet another hit - an 'act of God' this time - in a series of calamities that have struck the country in its ongoing conflict since 2011. But how bad is Coronavirus in Syria? More specifically, how bad is it compared to the country's endless war and the measureless misery it's brought upon its people? Death, displacement, besiegement, bombardment, sectarian and ethnic violence, inflation and severe shortages in the most basic of needs have resulted in one of the worst refugee crises that has tested the limits of the International Community's capacity for compassion. The exodus of the displaced was soon to be 'contained' and brought 'under control' leaving those fleeing the atrocities of the Syrian war stuck in limbo: between borders, at airports, in detention centres or refugee camps in neighbouring countries, on the doorstep of the EU and sometimes within it.

Since the EU-Turkey Deal in 2016, many Syrians have found themselves between a rock and a hard place: either face the enclosing circles of death in their war-torn homeland - vividly depicted in Waad al-Kateab's *For Sama* (2019) - or attempt an escape into the unknown, or what turned out to be a greater confinement in a no-man's land battling bureaucracy, xenophobia and an increasingly disinterested international community. One thing for sure though: there's been no shortage of death, even for those who manage to cheat it and dodge chemical attacks, barrel bombs, siege-induced starvations, arbitrary arrests and kidnappings on the way out. The dream of a peaceful life in Europe has led many to take perilous sea voyages that have proven tragically fatal.

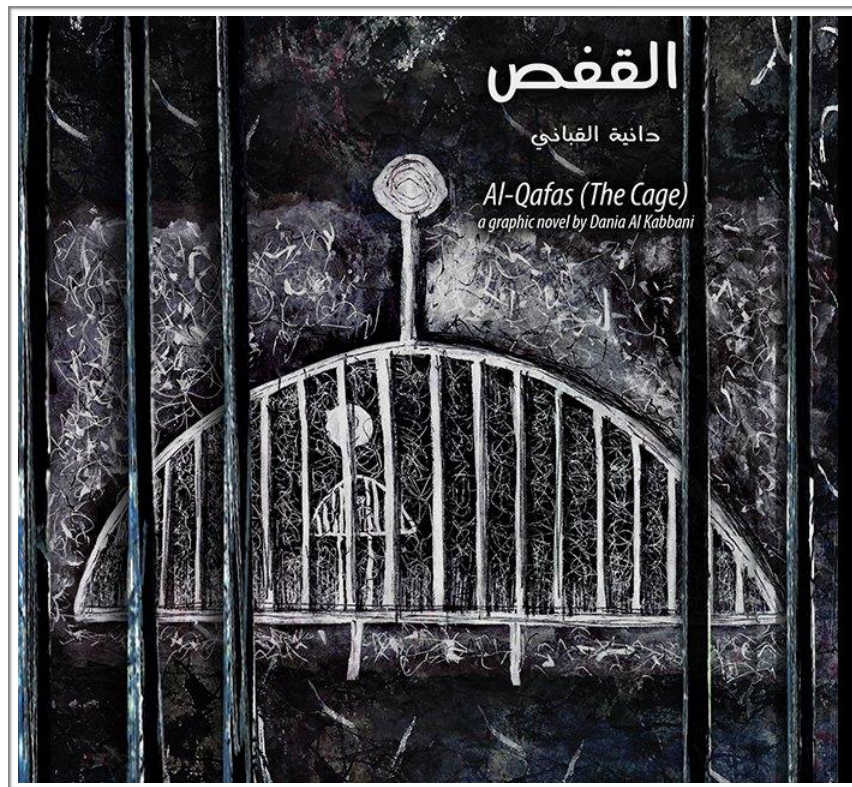
The haunting image of toddler, Alan Kurdi, washed up on a beach in Turkey, encapsulates the suffering of the most vulnerable of refugees: their desperation to reach a safe heaven only to be outrun by Death that catches up with them in its various forms. Alas, Alan's tragic demise didn't seem to have a lasting effect; the world moved on, some even ridiculed his death, while others urged their nations to send out 'gunships to stop the migrants.' Sadly, there have been since many Alan Kurdis, young and old, swallowed by a greedy, insatiable Mediterranean, condemning them to the greatest confinement of all: the eternal separation between the dead and the living.



Cartoon by Syrian artist, Jawad Morad

Indeed, for almost a decade now, Syrians have been no strangers to lockdown; they've experienced it in multiple forms and lived it through unimaginable Kafkaesque scenarios of mental torment and physical imprisonment as demonstrated in Dania al-Kabbani's *The Cage* (2018), which traces the personal narrative of a young Damascene woman battling the absurdities of the Syrian crisis at home and abroad (in Lebanon and the USA). Her quest for emancipation takes her on a harrowing, claustrophobic journey: from one metaphorical cage onto another, often a bigger more oppressive one - thanks to an unholy alliance between a relentless bloody war and a twisted international logic that penalises the victims and contributes to their

misery. From blanket travel bans to indiscriminate economic sanctions and selective military interventions, ordinary Syrian citizens stand helpless in the midst of a larger geopolitical struggle that has turned their country into a battlefield for old powerful enemies in combat with one another trying to resolve their own disputes. What started off as an organic uprising calling for democratic reform has long been hijacked and turned into a monstrous proxy war, among other things.



Dania al-Kabbani's *The Cage* (2018)

I'm not going to discuss the ins and outs of the political conflict in Syria; what's the point? I'm more interested in the daily struggles of ordinary people - those, who through no fault of their own, have found themselves at the receiving end of man-made suffering that transcends ethnicity, sect and political affiliation. Covid-19 has been called, somewhat misleadingly, a 'leveller', for it has the potential to infect everyone, regardless of race, gender, sexuality or class. While this may be true, the reality is that not every country is equally prepared to fight the disease; even the most sophisticated of health systems in the developed world have struggled to deal with a pandemic at such scale. Lockdown, therefore, became the only solution to tackle this global health crisis. People around the world have had to adjust to a new

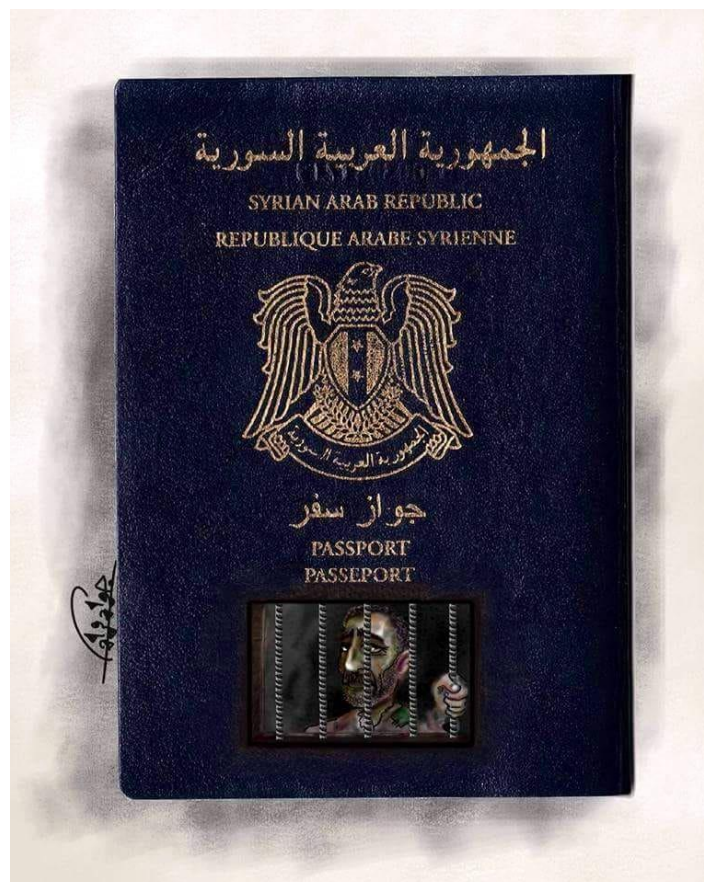
reality of curbed freedoms: closure of international borders, travel bans and social distancing measures, which meant being unable to see loved ones in person. Adjusting to this new reality has no doubt been hard, but we understand the rationale behind it: we need to contain the disease and stop it from spreading. What can't be rationalised, however, is the unnecessary imposition of such measures when there's no pandemic: solely for political and populist reasons. Palestinians stuck in Gaza - the world's largest open prison - have long known this injustice all too well.

Not being able to see one's loved ones has been the norm for many Syrians too, particularly those who have been displaced and separated from their families and have ended up living in different parts of the world. While going back is not an option for many (especially political activists for whom the risk of being arrested and forcibly disappeared is too high), inviting family members over to safe parts of the Western world (of which many Syrians are now full citizens) has become ever more difficult, if not impossible, over the years: from Trump's blanket 'Muslim ban' to the EU's hypocritical policies and Britain's Brexit hysteria, Syrians living in these 'safe heavens' in the West are reminded every day that the right to family life isn't extended to them - another indicator of their second-class citizenship status.

I hear well-meaning friends and colleagues complain about not being able to see their friends and family 'for weeks'; I empathise, of course, but I can't help thinking how privileged they are because they'll be able to see them when this is all over. Alas, this is not likely to be the case for many Syrians, who will still have to battle the longterm pandemic of racist immigration policies dictating an ever-growing list of ludicrous visa requirements for citizens of the Global South, for whom planning a trip to Europe or North America is an onerous, costly and an extremely laborious process that has to be planned well in advance - the exact opposite of what Western passport-holders are used to when visiting most countries around the world: a quick visa stamp. The Syrian crisis has demonstrated how the chances for obtaining a Western visitor's visa for citizens of the Global South become even more remote if they happen to come from a conflict zone.

I remember a conversation I had with an immigration lawyer in London a few years ago; I was hoping he'd be able to help me secure a UK visitor's visa for my parents to come over for a short break. His advice was 'not to waste my time and money'- despite the fact that they had visited the country before and never

overstayed their leave. He thought the chances were so remote that I should consider meeting them elsewhere in the world: maybe in Ireland or somewhere in the Schengen Zone. On reflection, however, he thought that their application for an Irish or a Schengen visa - generally less demanding than a UK visa - wouldn't be successful either; apparently, 'family reunion' in the form of a short holiday isn't a 'good-enough' reason to grant visas to Syrian passport holders 'at the time'. I recall the cold, matter-of-fact tone with which he'd announced it, as though that were quite normal. Imagine replacing the category 'Syrian' with anything else: 'woman', 'queer', etc. What kind of blatant discrimination is this? Try another random category: imagine a new regulation that bans Brighton residents from travelling to London just for being from Brighton! The absurdity of visa regulations and the unnecessary misery they inflict on people is indeed bewildering; the sad reality is that many people don't know (or don't care) - it only becomes a 'thing' when they experience not being able to see their loved ones through lockdown measures. But will it get them to empathise with others on whom these regulations are an avoidable imposition? Will they vote for politicians with more humane immigration policies?

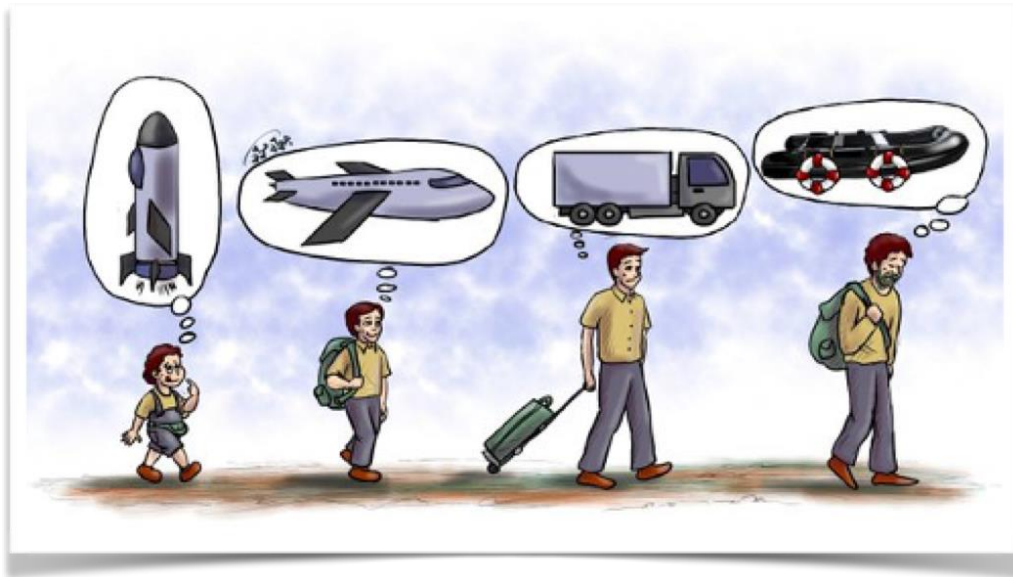


Cartoon by Syrian artist, Jawad Morad

As Jawad Morad's caricature shows, holding a Syrian passport has become more of a hindrance than a means to facilitate travel; the document has turned into a certificate of confinement: a prison sentence as such. Sadly, it's not only the West that has made it more difficult for Syrian nationals to travel and reunite with loved ones. Even neighbouring countries in the region (such as Lebanon, Jordan and Turkey with whom Syria had had reciprocal visa-free travel arrangements before the war) have now implemented a series of measures making it very difficult for Syrian passport holders to cross their borders. I think of the last time I met my family in Beirut a couple of years ago. I couldn't help thinking of the absurdity of the power and privilege endowed upon me because of my British passport, which granted me a speedy entry into the country with a friendly smile and a quick passport stamp. I sailed through immigration after my 4.5-hour flight from London and was in my hotel in Central Beirut in no time. My parents' journey from next door Damascus, on the other hand, couldn't have been more different. They had to provide evidence of the hotel booking, carry \$4,000 in cash (\$2,000 each), which they had to show to the immigration officer at the border crossing and wait for hours to be seen with no guarantee of being let in despite providing all the required paperwork. Luckily, they were eventually granted entry and leave to remain for the exact number of days confirmed in the hotel booking (border officers rang up the hotel to verify the booking). A mere 53-mile journey (the equivalent of a short hop between Brighton and London) had now become an unnecessary time-consuming bureaucratic exercise reminding Syrian nationals of the inferiority of their passport even when travelling regionally. It took them 12 hours to reach the hotel in Beirut; I was able to get there from London, over 2,200 miles away, in less than 6 hours.

At least we met - after 4 long years; and we had a lovely time, especially when my sister and her children joined us a couple of days later. It was wonderful meeting my niece and nephew in the flesh for the first time. For them, I'd been more of a phantom character - a Santa-Claus figure whose existence was confirmed through the presents I sent. They belong to a generation born in virtual lockdown in Syria, experiencing worldwide prejudice and travel restrictions as the norm; it's all they know. My sister tells me of her desperation as her toddlers ask her why they can't see their relations who live abroad. Why can't they travel? My niece actually thinks that my brother and I live on different planets - she sees photos of us and asks her mother what it's like to live on 'Planet England' and 'Planet Canada' (where her other uncle lives). Most parents dream of providing a better future for their children than

the one they'd had themselves, but that's not an option for the young parents of the war generation. 'Sometimes I look at my children playing in confinement and I feel guilty for having brought them to this world,' says Nisreen, a mother of two. Waad al-Kateab captures this sentiment - the tormenting sense of guilt - in her film, *For Sama*, as she realises she isn't able to protect her infant daughter. It's a terrible feeling that many parents find themselves in because of a man-made crisis, now exacerbated by a pandemic adding yet another shade of confinement.

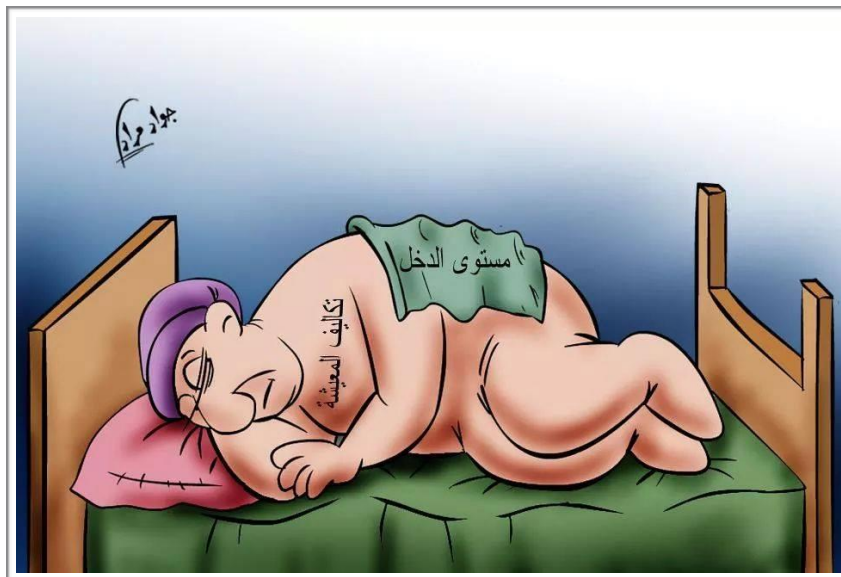


Cartoon by Jawad Morad.

Jawad Morad's illustration captures the dwindling dreams of the war generation: the childhood dream of becoming an astronaut and exploring outer space gradually diminishes and turns into a desperate urge to flee the war, even if onboard a dinghy.

How about those who stayed back? Those who couldn't or wouldn't get out; some of course have benefited from the killing and become warlords and mafia-style business owners. Those, I don't really want to discuss, for they represent the worst kind of treachery and betrayal. For everyone else, the cost of living has rocketed tremendously. Damascus used to be known as '*emm el-fa'eer*' [the mother of the poor], an affectionate term that indicated the City's compassion for its poorest

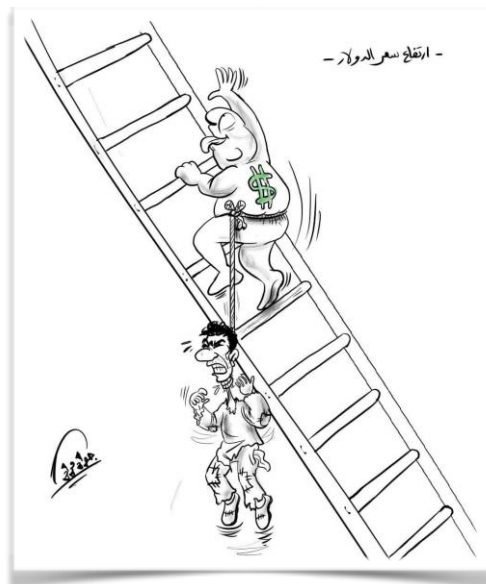
residents, who, regardless of how hard things got, would still be able to get by and make ends meet. Sadly, that's not the case anymore.



Jawad Morad likens the average income to a skimpy cloth used as a duvet!

The value of the Syrian Lira against the US dollar has been in free fall for the past few years. When I last lived in Syria in 2006, \$1 was around SYP 50 (Syrian Liras). \$1 has now reached an astronomical SYP 1,860 causing a huge inflation crisis that has rendered basic daily needs unaffordable for ordinary people. Many have been relying on international remittances sent by relatives abroad, but not everyone has someone abroad who can help out - not to mention the complexities surrounding getting the money to Syria, thanks to the international sanctions on the Syrian

regime that punish the entire population collectively. Some business people have shamelessly profited from the crisis as Morad's cartoons show.



Captions: Left: the rising value of the US dollar against the Syrian Lira is suffocating ordinary people. Right: A businessman using the US dollar hike (the drum) to set the prices (a dancing woman) on fire.

So how has Covid-19 impacted Syria after all? The government did impose a lockdown, which was more of a curfew in that it was time-based: people were allowed out during certain hours, but those 'with connections' managed to get 'exemption cards'; in fact, so many people secured 'exemption cards' that the whole lockdown felt rather pointless and was subsequently lifted. After all, a curfew-style lockdown with little or no social-distancing measures in place would be a little ridiculous, especially in the greater context of confinement imposed on the people by the relentless war for nearly a decade now. So how do people cope? Lockdown or not, they have had to find innovative ways to work, keep themselves busy, home-school their children, make ends meet and stay alive. Most of all, they know that the key to survival lies in their resilience, faith and hope for a better future post-war and post-Covid.

The normality of life has to be maintained, even when everything else is anything but normal. It's a state of mind that helps keep them going. My mother tells me how she shuts the whole world out when things get bad; she escapes to her inner world and childhood memories of a peaceful Damascus, of jasmines and *Mamoul el-*

Eid, of mosaic water fountains, singing canaries, nesting doves and fruit-bearing quince trees dotted around the courtyard. She's lucky, for she still has her garden, which she attends every day; it's 'therapeutic', she says. And she can still make *Mamoul el-Eid* in her kitchen and let the delicious scents of fine Damascene cuisine, mixed with the garden's floral fragrances of roses, jasmines, citrus and carnations, carry her back to the idyllic years of her youth, an era she's fortunate to have lived through - an era, she's determined her grandchildren will one day reconstruct in their own time, when this is all over.



Captions: Left: My mother's homemade *Mamoul el-Eid*. Right: A fresh cutting of Damascene jasmine.

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